



# **The Cambridge Access Validating Agency**

Access Validating Agency relicensing review  
by the Quality Assurance Agency  
for Higher Education

May 2013

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## About this review

This is a report of an Access Validating Agency (AVA) relicensing review conducted by the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA)<sup>1</sup> at the Cambridge Access Validating Agency (the AVA). The AVA relicensing review process is described in the publication *AVA relicensing: Operational description*.<sup>2</sup> Other parts of *The QAA Recognition Scheme for Access to Higher Education* can be found on the Access to HE website.<sup>3</sup>

The main purposes of the review were to assess the AVA's compliance with QAA's AVA licensing criteria,<sup>4</sup> and, on the basis of this assessment, make a judgement about its risk level and a decision about whether its AVA licence should be renewed. These judgements were based on evidence derived from a number of sources, principally:

- documentary evidence provided by the Cambridge Access Validating Agency (CAVA)
- discussions between the review team and AVA staff and members of its Council, Executive Board, and Quality and Academic Development Committee, which took place during the review visit on 13-14 May 2013
- the views of AVA stakeholders - gathered through a survey conducted by QAA - which informed the review team's analysis of documentary evidence and its agendas for face-to-face meetings.

This report:

- identifies features of good practice
- identifies required actions, where the AVA is not fully compliant with the licensing criteria
- identifies recommended actions, where the AVA can enhance its practice
- states QAA's judgement of the AVA's risk level: low, medium, high or very high (see appendix for descriptions of each category of risk)
- states QAA's AVA licensing renewal decision and any follow-up activity.

A summary of the outcomes is given in the section starting on page 2. Explanations of the outcomes are given in the section starting on page 4.

## About the AVA

Background information about the Cambridge Access Validating Agency (CAVA) is given in the AVA's profile on the Access to HE website: [www.accesstohe.ac.uk/HowCourses/AVA-profiles/Pages/Cambridge-Access-Validating-Agency.aspx](http://www.accesstohe.ac.uk/HowCourses/AVA-profiles/Pages/Cambridge-Access-Validating-Agency.aspx).

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<sup>1</sup> [www.accesstohe.ac.uk](http://www.accesstohe.ac.uk)

<sup>2</sup> [www.accesstohe.ac.uk/AboutUs/Publications/Pages/AVA-relicensing-operational-description.aspx](http://www.accesstohe.ac.uk/AboutUs/Publications/Pages/AVA-relicensing-operational-description.aspx)

<sup>3</sup> [www.accesstohe.ac.uk/aboutus/publications](http://www.accesstohe.ac.uk/aboutus/publications)

<sup>4</sup> [www.accesstohe.ac.uk/AboutUs/Publications/Pages/AVA-licensing-criteria-05-11.aspx](http://www.accesstohe.ac.uk/AboutUs/Publications/Pages/AVA-licensing-criteria-05-11.aspx)

## Summary of outcomes

### Required actions

CAVA's compliance with each of the five AVA licensing precepts at the time of the review visit is summarised below, followed by the action QAA **required** CAVA to take to achieve full compliance.

#### **Governance**

CAVA met all of the AVA licensing criteria.

#### **Strategic planning**

CAVA met all of the AVA licensing criteria.

#### **Management**

CAVA met all of the AVA licensing criteria.

#### **Course recognition**

CAVA met all of the AVA licensing criteria.

#### **Moderation, monitoring and certification**

CAVA met nearly all of the AVA licensing criteria. One criterion was not fully met.

To meet licensing criterion 5.9, CAVA is **required** to: include in the contractual agreement, between the moderator and the AVA, the criteria and process for the termination of a moderator's employment.

### Recommended actions

QAA **recommended** to CAVA the following actions to enhance practice.

#### **Governance**

- Confirm the actual decision made by Council about the voting rights of Council representatives' alternates and make a formal note that the minutes of the Council meeting were an inaccurate record of Council's decision (licensing criterion 1.10).

#### **Moderation, monitoring and certification**

- Update its guidance on the moderation system to include examples of matters considered serious enough to warrant a more immediate response (licensing criterion 5.17).
- Prepare an annual overview of the content of course leaders' annual reports to inform the oversight of the effectiveness of course monitoring as well as the AVA's strategic planning process (licensing criterion 5.26).

## Features of good practice

QAA identified the following **features of good practice** at CAVA.

- The approach taken to foster among stakeholders a shared commitment to the pursuit of the organisation's mission and objectives which are congruent with the overall Principles and Aims of the QAA Recognition Scheme for Access to Higher Education (licensing criterion 1.2).

<b>Risk judgement</b>	<b>AVA licence decision</b>
CAVA's level of risk: <b>low</b>	CAVA's AVA licence: <b>renewed</b>
<b>Follow up</b> QAA required CAVA to: <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• report the actions taken in response to the required and recommended actions in its next annual self-evaluation report.</li></ul>	
<b>Please note: QAA publishes changes to CAVA's risk level, the current status of its licence and any required or recommended actions in the AVA profile.</b>	

## Explanation of the outcomes

This section explains the outcomes of the relicensing review in five main sections corresponding to the five licensing precepts. Paragraph numbers and numbered references correspond to the AVA licensing criteria. A **glossary** of terms is provided on page 19.

### 1 Governance

#### Legal and constitutional arrangements

1.1 CAVA's constitutional basis is set out in its Memorandum and Articles of Association. These specify its legal identity, function, aims and principal governance structures.

1.2 CAVA's company objects are congruent with the aims of *The QAA Recognition Scheme for Access to HE (Recognition Scheme)*.

The review team observed, among the AVA's stakeholders, a particularly strong commitment to the pursuit of the mission and objectives of CAVA. This commitment was reflected in the very high number of responses, with many positive ratings and comments, to the survey of the AVA's stakeholders carried out by QAA in advance of the review visit. Commitment to the AVA's mission was also evident from the responses of those who met the team. Stakeholders clearly recognise that their full and active participation in the governance of the AVA and in the quality assurance and enhancement of Access to HE provision is integral to achieving objectives that are shared by the AVA and its member organisations.

The team noted that the AVA takes a deliberate and planned approach to encourage this commitment, and this is reflected in the way that the member application and induction processes are operated. The approach taken to foster among stakeholders a shared commitment to the pursuit of the organisation's mission and objectives which are congruent with the overall Principles and Aims of the QAA Recognition Scheme for Access to Higher Education is a **feature of good practice**.

1.3 CAVA's constitutional structure requires the involvement of member organisations.

1.4 CAVA is not itself a provider of Access to HE courses or a receiver of Access to HE students.

1.5 Member organisations include organisations providing Access to HE courses and higher education institutions that receive Access to HE students and are subscribers to QAA.

1.6 CAVA operates formal and transparent processes for approving organisations as members, and for agreeing any other formal organisational relationships.

1.7 CAVA's legal identity, constitutional and governance arrangements provide formal accountability to member organisations; protection from the undue influence of any one of, or a minority of, its member organisations, or their representatives; independent decision-making and operation as an AVA; and an identified basis on which it is able to enter into legally binding agreements.

1.8 CAVA has appropriate agreements in place with the suppliers of goods or services that are integral to the operation of the AVA.

## Governance

1.9 CAVA has clear descriptions of its governance and deliberative structures set out in its formal documentation. Council is the AVA's governing body, and it has two formal committees: the Executive Board and the Quality and Academic Development Committee. The Executive Board was established in August 2012, replacing the Planning and Finance Committee. The decision to establish the Executive Board was taken because of the increasing size of the Council, which consists entirely of representatives from each of the AVA's further and higher education members, and to enable more focused consideration of specific matters. The Executive Board has a wider brief than the Planning and Finance Committee, being also responsible for strategic planning.

1.10 CAVA's governance structures include relevant experience and expertise in relation to governance and AVA matters. The Chairs and Vice-Chairs of the Executive Board are appointed from the Council membership. The Chair of the Quality and Academic Development Committee can be appointed from the membership of the Council, Executive Board or the Quality and Academic Development Committee as long as they are not a representative of a providing institution. The constitutions of both committees require the appointment of individuals from beyond the membership of the AVA, which enables an external perspective as well as a wider range of skills and experience.

At the time of the review, Council had 25 members. Members' Council representatives are entitled to send an alternate to deputise for them when they are unable to attend Council meetings. The review team explored whether the current model for membership of Council was sustainable, particularly as the number of member organisations rises and stretches further afield. Council members told the team that prospective member organisations are fully informed of the expected commitment to participate in the governance structure and that meetings of Council are held in various locations to help with attendance. They considered that the model, while having its challenges, is important to maintain as it ensures an equal voice for all members and provides a supportive network for both new and existing members. They also remarked on the benefits of having the new Executive Board as a more focused vehicle for developing recommendations for Council to consider.

The review team noted an apparent contradiction in documentation, presented for the review, about whether alternates can vote at Council meetings. The Manual for CAVA Members, which is the AVA's definitive governance document, states that 'Alternate Council Representatives do not have the right to vote unless they carry a proxy vote on behalf of their Council Representative'. Council members who met the review team confirmed that position. However, the minutes of Council's June 2012 meeting state that 'it was agreed that Alternates could bring a written proxy enabling them to contribute to the meeting but would not have voting rights.' The record of the decision made by Council therefore appeared to be inaccurate. The AVA is therefore **recommended** to confirm the actual decision made by Council about the voting rights of Council representatives' alternates and to make a formal note that the minutes of the Council meeting were an inaccurate record of Council's decision.

1.11 Council and its committees operate according to terms of reference that detail a clear remit, responsibilities and reporting relationships through which their accountability to the organisation is defined.

1.12 Council is the ultimate authority for the AVA licence and is responsible for ensuring that the organisation meets its responsibilities as an AVA. Council has direct responsibility for the formal approval of reports and responses to QAA in relation to the AVA licensing requirements. Council members acknowledged that it could make it clearer for members if the responsibilities related to this criterion were directly listed in the Council's terms of

reference rather than, as now, being cross-referenced to another section of the manual for CAVA members.

1.13 Council also has ultimate responsibility for the company's legal and financial affairs, policy development and strategic direction (delegated to the Executive Board), as well as the approval and quality assurance and enhancement of the AVA's recognised Access to HE courses, monitoring and approval of academic standards, and the process for the award of Access to HE Diplomas to students (delegated to the Quality and Academic Development Committee).

1.14 Responsibilities are specified and appropriately located within the governance structure.

1.15 Monitoring and reporting procedures are in place through which the Board can ensure that delegated activities are properly undertaken.

1.16 The extent and limits of authority of bodies or individuals holding delegated responsibilities are defined.

1.17 The separation and links between CAVA's governance and management structures are clear, and the separation is demonstrated in the AVA's operation.

1.18 Full and generally accurate records of committees' decision-making are maintained, and are sufficient for purposes of public accountability, internal reference and administrative effectiveness. The review team noted a small number of instances where subsequent minutes did not always confirm that actions agreed at previous meetings had been completed.

1.19 Minutes of Council are retained for the lifetime of the organisation.

## 2 Strategic planning

### Planning and monitoring

2.1 CAVA operates a regular process for strategic planning that takes account of the areas expected by this licensing criterion. The team noted an exception here relating to the means by which the strategic planning process is able to take account of the content of course leaders' annual reports. (See also below, paragraph 5.26, where a recommended action is also provided.)

2.2 The AVA's strategic plan for Access to HE specifies strategic objectives, with linked operational targets, and with responsibilities assigned and deadlines set for meeting the targets. The AVA has recently moved from a one-year strategic plan to a three-year plan and in doing so has taken the opportunity to tighten up the format of the strategic plan. The plan now includes fewer strategic objectives than previously and these have performance indicators and measurable targets. The review team considered that some of the target actions could be developed more fully. The Council and Executive Board members who met the team recognised that some targets were less tightly defined, stating that this was partly the product of creating a plan that was acceptable to a wide group of stakeholders, and acknowledged that further enhancements could be made to the strategic plan. Overall, the team concluded that the clearer format of the strategic plan should provide a sound basis for further development.

2.3 The strategic objectives include objectives relating to development, promotion and enhancement in the area(s) in which the AVA operates.

2.4 The strategic plan is formally approved through CAVA's governance structures.

2.5 The strategic plan is regularly monitored; the AVA's achievement of its strategic objectives is assessed and risk-rated; and action is taken in light of the outcomes of the monitoring process.

2.6 The strategic planning process is considered through the AVA's self-assessment processes.

### Development, promotion and enhancement

2.7 CAVA provides a focus for the development, promotion and enhancement of Access to HE provision in its area(s) of operation.

2.8 CAVA gathers and analyses information relevant to the development, promotion and enhancement of Access to HE, and communicates its analyses to its providers and other stakeholders on a regular basis.

2.9 CAVA provides advice on the delivery of the Access to HE Diploma to ensure that providers meet the AVA's expectations and the requirements of *The Access to Higher Education Diploma and credit specifications*; and it arranges events and opportunities for practitioners to support and develop good practice.

2.10 CAVA promotes Access to HE through its activities and publications.

## **3 Management**

### **Resources and financial management**

- 3.1 CAVA has sufficient financial resources to exercise its AVA responsibilities in full.
- 3.2 The AVA's facilities, administrative systems and allocation of funds are sufficient to manage its AVA responsibilities including, in particular, responsibilities relating to assuring the quality and standards of its recognised Access to HE provision.
- 3.3 The AVA operates a responsible, systematic and rigorous approach to the management of its financial affairs.

### **Staffing**

- 3.4 CAVA's level and structure of staffing can deliver the requirements involved in the holding of an AVA licence. The AVA has increased its level of staffing in the last year and anticipated the creation of a further post in the near future. Staffing capacity is listed in the AVA's risk register and is monitored by the Council and Executive Board.

### **Self-assessment and risk management**

- 3.5 CAVA has procedures for regularly monitoring and assessing the quality, effectiveness and security of its management and operations.

### **Operations**

- 3.6 Minutes of Council and its committees' proceedings and other formal records are produced, are retrievable, and are held for an agreed period.
- 3.7 The AVA develops, maintains and documents procedures, including indications of specific actions for AVA staff, in relation to key aspects of AVA operations for Access to HE to ensure that the work of the AVA is not unduly reliant on the knowledge, practices or efforts of individual staff.
- 3.8 The AVA's documented operational procedures for Access to HE are clear and readily available, and include processes expected by this licensing criterion.

### **Data management and transfer**

- 3.9 CAVA has effective structures and systems for collecting, recording and holding data about Access to HE providers, courses, students and awards. The AVA has a well developed, secure database system that is accessed online by tutors and external moderators. A valuable feature of the system is that tutors are required to input assessment marks on an ongoing basis, allowing the AVA to track progress. The system enables moderators to specify more precisely the samples of student assessments and is also used to support the work of final award boards.

### **Communications**

- 3.10 CAVA has a range of mechanisms through which it communicates to, and gathers feedback from, member organisations and other stakeholders, about matters relating to Access to HE.

3.11 CAVA monitors providers' published information about Access to HE to verify its accuracy and currency, and its consistency with QAA requirements.

3.12 The AVA makes use of the Access to HE logo in its own publications and ensures that its use of the logo is consistent with QAA's published guidance.

### **Complaints and appeals**

3.13 CAVA has transparent and accessible procedures to enable complaints and appeals to be received, considered and resolved fairly, including complaints and appeals (by students and providers) that relate to its role as an awarding body.

## **4 Course recognition**

### **Diploma development (and transfer)**

4.1 CAVA has a systematic and transparent approach to developing new Access to HE Diplomas (and considering requests for course transfer).

4.2 The AVA considers key information at an early stage in the development of new Diplomas (or consideration of transfer requests), and confirms those areas expected by this licensing criterion.

4.3 During the development phase for a new Diploma, individuals currently delivering HE provision in a subject relevant to the progression route(s) are involved in advising on the expectations and requirements for entry to the progression route(s) and the appropriateness of the Diploma proposals in meeting those expectations.

4.4 In considering a request by a provider for the transfer of responsibility for course recognition from another AVA, CAVA formally confirms, before the transfer is agreed, those areas expected by this licensing criterion.

4.5 CAVA publishes clear guidance for those involved in the development (and transfer) of Access to HE Diplomas. The guidance includes the information expected by this licensing criterion.

4.6 The AVA's guidance also includes explicit statements that the design of Diplomas should be appropriate to the primary purpose of Access to HE courses, and that Access to HE Diplomas are intended to provide a preparation for study in UK higher education but the award of a Diploma does not provide guaranteed entry to UK higher education programmes.

### **Validation processes**

4.7 The AVA operates a thorough, transparent and consistent approach to the validation of Access to HE Diplomas.

4.8 The AVA's validation process involves the scrutiny of Diploma proposals by an appointed panel, which assesses the proposals against a set of clear, standard criteria, including those listed in licensing criterion 4.10.

4.9 Both the individual units and the totality of each named Access to HE Diploma are considered as part of the Diploma validation process.

## **Validation criteria**

4.10 The AVA's validation process and criteria have ensured that, for a Diploma to be recommended for approval, it meets the requirements of this licensing criterion.

4.11 The outcomes of the validation process for each Diploma, including recommended conditions of approval and textual amendments to documentation, are recorded.

## **Validation panels**

4.12 An expert, external panel is appointed by CAVA to scrutinise proposals for new, transferred or major modifications to Access to HE Diplomas.

4.13 The composition of panels ensures that panel members jointly provide current, relevant experience and expertise in the delivery and assessment of Access to HE courses; in the delivery of HE programmes in areas indicated as intended progression routes for the Diploma(s) being considered; and curriculum knowledge relevant to the Diploma(s) and all the units being considered.

4.14 The number of members and composition of validation panels for Access to HE Diplomas, and the criteria for selecting panel members, are clearly specified and consistently applied.

4.15 The Chair and members of the validation panel have no conflicts of interest in respect of the outcome of the validation event.

4.16 No more than one member of the validation panel is also represented on the body which has been designated as responsible for the approval of Diplomas within the AVA.

4.17 AVA officers attend validation events to ensure consistency of conduct, and advise the panel on the AVA's validation process and requirements, including requirements that relate to the proper application of QAA's requirements for Access to HE Diplomas.

4.18 Before the panel event, panel members are informed about their roles and responsibilities; the purpose and conduct of validation panel events; QAA's current requirements about the Access to HE Diploma; the criteria for successful validation; and the possible outcomes of the process and the post-panel process.

4.19 The panel makes a recommendation for approval, including any recommended conditions of approval, and the panel's recommendations are referred to the designated body within the organisation's governance structure for formal approval.

## **Diploma approval**

4.20 The Quality and Academic Development Committee considers the validation panel report and the panel's recommendations and confirms that the AVA's validation processes and criteria have been properly and consistently applied.

4.21 The Quality and Academic Development Committee grants or withholds approval (with or without conditions) and, with regard to any conditions on the approval of a Diploma, it confirms that conditions will ensure that the Diploma meets the AVA's validation expectations; that there are clear timescales for meeting conditions; the date by which any conditions must be met; and the process for confirming that conditions have been met.

4.22 The AVA monitors whether and when conditions have been met, ensuring that the process is followed for confirming this.

4.23 When CAVA is satisfied that the conditions have been met, the approval of an Access to HE Diploma is formally recorded, and providers wishing to deliver the Diploma are informed that they may proceed.

4.24 The withdrawal of approval from a Diploma before the end of its validation period would be considered by the Quality and Academic Development Committee with reference to standard criteria; there are procedures for withdrawal and any necessary amendments to the Access courses database would be made in that event.

4.25 The AVA holds full records of all validation and approval decisions. It maintains definitive Diploma documentation, making amendments, as necessary, to reflect approved modifications.

4.26 The Quality and Academic Development Committee maintains oversight of the validation and approval process and criteria, and is responsible for ensuring that processes are robust and operated consistently.

### **Provider/centre approval**

4.27 CAVA operates a transparent, systematic and consistent approach to the approval of providers for the delivery of Access to HE courses, through which it confirms that the provider meets its criteria for centre approval.

4.28 CAVA formally confirms centre approval for the delivery of named Access to HE Diplomas (or Access to HE provision) before a provider is permitted to deliver any part of any individual Access to HE Diploma.

4.29 The AVA reconsiders (and may withdraw) approval if the provider fails to continue to meet the terms of its approval. The withdrawal procedure meets the requirements of this licensing criterion.

### **Criteria for provider/centre approval**

4.30 The AVA's process and criteria for centre approval ensure that providers approved to deliver Access to HE courses are located in the UK and have in place all the resources, policies, procedures and systems required by the AVA licensing criteria.

4.31 CAVA's process and criteria for centre approval ensure that providers explicitly commit to cooperating with the AVA's moderation, monitoring and standardisation procedures.

### **Course recognition**

4.32 CAVA operates a standard process to confirm that Diploma approval and centre approval have been satisfactorily completed before course recognition is confirmed.

4.33 Providers that have applied to deliver a new Diploma and have been approved to do so are notified when Diploma approval has been confirmed and are informed of the date from which the course is recognised and may start.

4.34 When the AVA has confirmed recognition of a new course, it uploads the required course information to the Access courses database. It revises course records, as necessary, to maintain the currency of information available on the database.

## **Modifications and amendments**

4.35 CAVA provides mechanisms through which providers, moderators and member higher education institutions can suggest modifications to units or Diplomas, enabling those suggestions to be systematically considered.

4.36 CAVA operates standard procedures for regulating modifications to units and Diplomas, and ensures that any feedback about the unit/Diploma received from providers/centres, moderators or receiving HE institutions is taken into account.

4.37 CAVA differentiates between minor and major modifications; makes clear where authority lies for making different kinds of modification or amendment; and gives an appropriate level of scrutiny to each (including full revalidation where modifications are substantial).

4.38 When minor modifications are considered (including modifications to units included in more than one Diploma), the AVA confirms that affected Diplomas will continue to comply with the AVA's validation criteria before approving the modification.

4.39 If modifications are made to a unit or Diploma which is delivered by more than one provider, all providers involved in the delivery of the unit or Diploma are informed of the amendments.

4.40 The Quality and Academic Development Committee has final approval of unit and Diploma modifications.

## **Revalidation and confirmation of provider/centre approval**

4.41 CAVA's standard validation period for Diplomas is five years from the date of initial approval. The AVA maintains a forward schedule of revalidation for Diplomas.

4.42 Periodic Diploma revalidation and confirmation of provider/centre approval are requirements of continued course recognition.

4.43 CAVA operates a process for the periodic revalidation of Diplomas, which takes account of the areas required by this licensing criterion.

4.44 The constitution of revalidation panels is the same as for validation panels. Outcomes are confirmed by the Quality and Academic Development Committee.

4.45 If a Diploma is to be discontinued at or before the end of its validation period, providers are informed of the final date on which new starters may be enrolled, allowing reasonable time for registered students to complete the course or transfer to another appropriate course. Arrangements are made for transfer of credit, if necessary.

4.46 When a Diploma has been revalidated, the Access courses database is updated promptly with the necessary details.

## **5 Moderation, monitoring and certification**

### **Moderation processes**

5.1 CAVA maintains a system of regular external moderation, conducted by moderators appointed by the AVA, which applies to all recognised Access to HE courses.

5.2 CAVA provides information, in separate documents, about the operation of its moderation processes in guidance to moderators and to providers.

5.3 The AVA's guidance includes clear information about all the areas expected by this licensing criterion.

5.4 CAVA routinely reviews and updates its guidance to ensure it remains current.

### **Moderation responsibilities**

5.5 CAVA's moderation and course monitoring systems and processes ensure that all the areas expected by this licensing criterion are met.

### **Moderator recruitment, selection and appointments**

5.6 CAVA operates standard procedures, using clear and transparent criteria, for the selection and appointment of moderators, which ensure that moderators have relevant experience and relevant and current subject knowledge for their area(s) of responsibility.

5.7 Where moderators are involved in moderation at subject level, they are qualified and/or experienced in teaching in the area(s) that they are responsible for moderating, at a level at or beyond that at which the subject has been taught and assessed.

5.8 Moderators are appointed by, and are directly responsible to, CAVA.

5.9 Contractual agreements between the moderator and the AVA set out moderators' specific duties and term of service. All external moderators are appointed on one-year contracts initially, and contracts are reviewed each year.

The review team noted that there was no reference in the AVA's guidance for external moderators or contract of appointment to criteria for the termination of duties, or to what constitutes unsatisfactory performance. The contract specifies that four weeks' notice is required to terminate the contract except at the end of the academic year. In meetings with AVA officers and members of the Quality and Academic Development Committee the team was informed that where moderator performance is below standard their contracts would not be renewed at the end of the year. Both groups acknowledged that the identification of the criteria and process for termination of a moderator's employment and their inclusion in the contract would be appropriate. To meet licensing criterion 5.9, CAVA is **required** to: include in the contractual agreement, between the moderator and the AVA, the criteria and process for the termination of a moderator's employment.

5.10 Moderators are external to the providers of Access to HE courses and have no potential conflict of interest or involvement in admissions decisions relating to students' progression.

5.11 Where the moderator's role involves a direct relationship with individual Access to HE courses, the moderator's period of office for work with the individual course(s) is, in normal circumstances, no longer than four years.

5.12 The moderators of any individual Access to HE course jointly provide sufficient expertise at the subject level for the number and range of subject areas included in the course.

### **Moderator induction and training**

5.13 Moderators receive a planned programme of mandatory induction and training, supplemented by written guidance, which enables them to carry out their role effectively.

5.14 CAVA routinely advises moderators of any changes in the AVA's requirements, or changes that relate to the Access to HE Diploma. The AVA monitors external moderators' attendance at the AVA's update and standardisation events and those who are unable to attend are followed up by the AVA to ensure that they remain up to date.

5.15 There are mechanisms to enable moderators to compare standards and judgements across the AVA's Access to HE courses.

5.16 CAVA monitors moderators' performance, and takes appropriate action if it is deemed unsatisfactory.

### **Moderation reports**

5.17 CAVA has procedures to ensure that action is taken in response to matters raised in moderation reports.

Centres are usually required to respond to matters raised in moderators' first reports in time for the beginning of the next academic year, but the review team was concerned that there was no reference to circumstances where an issue might need to be addressed more immediately. In discussions with members of the Quality and Academic Development Committee, the team was given examples of issues where the Committee would expect a more immediate response from a centre. The review team **recommends** that the AVA updates its guidance on the moderation system to include examples of matters considered serious enough to warrant more immediate response.

Where matters are raised with centres through moderators' reports there is a comprehensive reporting process to the Quality and Academic Development Committee, a tracking system of progress, and follow-up as necessary. At the end of each year, summaries of moderators' reports for each centre are produced and risk rated using a traffic light approach. All centres receive a 'quality letter' at the beginning of an academic year highlighting the strengths and issues of the previous year and detailing an action plan, where necessary, to address any issues identified.

5.18 The AVA provides opportunities for centres to provide feedback on the moderation process.

### **Course monitoring and review**

5.19 CAVA monitors and reviews Access to HE courses on an annual basis. The AVA requires each centre to provide a course leader's report and a separate report on student progression, using the AVA's standard templates. Both reports predominantly consist of numerical data with only very brief comment. On their own, these reports would be insufficient as a means for course monitoring. The content of these reports is, however, supplemented though a separate requirement for the course leader to provide a structured oral report at the final awards board, which is recorded in the minutes.

Awards boards have a standard agenda and this item has four bullet points to indicate areas expected to be included in the oral reports presented by course leaders. The review team looked at a sample of minutes from awards boards and confirmed that course leaders' oral reports are recorded. The team concluded that these three mechanisms (the course leader's brief written report, the progression report, and the course leader's oral report presented at the awards board) are capable of collecting the information required by this licensing

criterion, but only if the information presented consistently covers the areas required by the AVA and only if the information is effectively synthesised.

In feedback from QAA to the AVA in its 2010-11 annual self-evaluation report, QAA has advised the AVA to give attention to its course monitoring process. In responding to the recommended action in paragraph 5.26 below, CAVA should assess the effectiveness of the course monitoring process in allowing the AVA to confirm the impact, quality and standards of its recognised Access to HE courses and to assess the effectiveness of its own quality assurance procedures.

5.20 The AVA collects statistical data about Access to HE courses and students according to a standard set of categories, including those required for reports to QAA.

5.21 The AVA's process for course reviews, described in paragraph 5.19 above, takes general account of providers' own self-assessment processes. The AVA previously encouraged centres to submit their own self-assessment reports, produced for other purposes, in their totality but found the reports to be of limited use because of the way that Access to HE was aggregated within the subjects and courses being considered.

5.22 Course reviews allow providers to report on all Access to HE provision at the same time, but they differentiate between outcomes and distinctive features of the different Diplomas.

5.23 Providers' course reviews provide information to the AVA about all of the areas expected by this licensing criterion.

5.24 CAVA seeks, and receives, feedback from its member higher education institutions about the performance of Access to HE students and the appropriateness of the preparation provided by its recognised Access to HE courses.

5.25 Through its committee cycle, CAVA analyses, formally considers and responds to the information and feedback (including statistical information) that it gathers from providers and higher education members.

5.26 The Quality and Academic Development Committee maintains oversight of the moderation and course monitoring processes, although there was no evidence that the content of course leaders' annual oral reports, recorded in the minutes of awards boards, (see paragraph 5.19 above) is collated and/or synthesised into a report to inform the Committee's overview. The AVA is **recommended** to prepare an annual overview of the content of course leaders' annual reports to inform both the oversight of the effectiveness of course monitoring and the AVA's strategic planning process (see also paragraph 2.1 and 5.19 above).

## **Standardisation**

5.27 CAVA takes steps to ensure that equivalent standards and requirements for achievement apply on different Access to HE courses, within the AVA and across different student cohorts, with reference to *The Access to Higher Education Diploma and credit specifications* and grading requirements.

## **Award of Access to HE Diplomas**

5.28 CAVA operates standard specified procedures for the award of Access to HE Diplomas to students that are consistent with *The Access to Higher Education Diploma and credit specifications*, grading requirements and assessment regulations.

5.29 The AVA operates secure data systems that maintain records of all the Access to HE awards that it makes.

### **Issue and dispatch of Access to HE Diplomas**

5.30 Students who meet the requirements for the award are issued the AVA's Access to HE Diploma which has a standard format and includes all the information required by QAA.

5.31 Students who have been awarded the Access to HE Diploma (or who have successfully completed units but have not achieved the requirements for the full Diploma) are issued with an achievement transcript, which has a standard format and includes details of their successfully completed units.

5.32 CAVA has a regulated process for the issue and dispatch of Access to HE Diplomas and achievement transcripts to students.

## **Conclusions**

CAVA is a well run and efficient organisation. The number of course providers has grown over the last two years or so and the AVA has responded to this growth by gradual increases in its staffing capacity. Changes have also been made more recently to the governance structure, enabling an increased focus on specific matters, particularly in those areas relating to precepts 2 and 3 (Strategic planning and Management).

The AVA takes a deliberate approach to fostering a strong and shared commitment to its mission among its stakeholder organisations and this is evident through the positive engagement by those stakeholders in the AVA's work and in their support of the AVA in its preparation for and engagement with the AVA relicensing review process.

CAVA met almost all of the licensing criteria. The one criterion that was not fully met presents no immediate or serious risks and the associated required action relates to a need to amend documentation. The AVA acknowledged the necessity for this action, and some recommended actions, through its constructive dialogue with the review team during the review visit. It was clear that the AVA's staff and committee members had given the relicensing review process an appropriate level of priority, thereby allowing the AVA to demonstrate its compliance with the AVA licensing criteria.

## Appendix 1: risk judgement guidance

This guidance provides a reference point for review teams when making the risk judgement. The descriptions indicate the common characteristics of AVAs in each of the four possible categories. These are neither absolute nor mutually exclusive.

Low	Medium	High	Very high
<b>The number and overall significance of criteria that are not met</b>			
All, or nearly all, licensing criteria have been met.	Most criteria have been met, but a few criteria in key areas have not been met in full.	Many criteria have not been met <b>or</b> there are major gaps in one or more key areas of the criteria.	The AVA is evidently in serious and/or continuing breach of the licensing criteria in key respects.
<b>The level and immediacy of risk presented by unmet criteria</b>			
Unmet criteria do not, individually or collectively, present any immediate or serious risks.	Unmet criteria do not present any immediate or severe risks.  Some moderate risks may exist which, without action, could lead to serious problems over time.	Unmet criteria present serious risk(s) individually or collectively, and limited controls are in place to mitigate the risk.  Consequences of inaction in some areas may be severe.	Unmet criteria present severe risk(s) individually or collectively to key functions.  The AVA has not taken appropriate action to mitigate risk when it has been identified.
<b>The nature of required actions that the AVA would need to take in order to meet the unmet licensing criteria</b>			
Required actions may relate, for example, to:  • minor omissions or oversights • a need to amend or update details in documentation, where the amendment will not require or result in major structural, operational or procedural change	Required actions may relate, for example, to:  • weakness in the operation of part of the AVA's governance structure, or lack of clarity about responsibilities • insufficient emphasis or priority given to Access to HE in the	Required actions may relate, for example, to:  • ineffective operation of parts of the AVA's governance structure • breaches by the AVA of its own financial management procedures • significant gaps in procedures	Major problems exist in key areas. The extent of action that would be required to meet the licensing criteria in full would require major structural or organisational change. Changes might require a staff capacity or allocation of resources that the AVA does not possess; external support to which it does not have

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• completion of activity that is already underway in a small number of areas that will allow it to meet the licensing criteria more fully.</li> </ul>	<p>AVA's planning processes</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• quality assurance procedures which, while broadly adequate, have some shortcomings in terms of the rigour with which quality and/or standards are protected.</li> </ul>	<p>relating to the AVA's major awarding body responsibilities, including for course validation, moderation, or security of certification.</p>	<p>access; or commitment to change that it has not demonstrated.</p>
<p><b>AVA's awareness of any problems identified, and the stage it has reached in taking action to address these</b></p>			
<p>The need for action has been acknowledged by the AVA in its review documentation or during the review, <b>and</b> it has provided clear evidence of appropriate action being taken within a reasonable timescale.</p> <p>There is evidence that the AVA is fully aware of its AVA responsibilities: previous responses to monitoring outcomes provide confidence that areas of weakness will be addressed promptly and professionally.</p>	<p>Plans that the AVA presents for addressing identified problems before or at the review are under-developed or not fully embedded in the AVA's operational planning.</p> <p>The AVA's priorities or recent actions suggest that it may not be fully aware of the significance of certain licensing criteria. However, previous responses to monitoring outcomes suggest that it will take the required actions and provided evidence of action as requested.</p>	<p>Plans for addressing identified problems that the AVA may present before or at the review are not adequate to rectify the problems, or there is little or no evidence of actual progress.</p> <p>The AVA may have limited understanding of the responsibilities associated with one or more key areas of the AVA licensing criteria, or may not be fully in control of all parts of its operation.</p>	<p>The AVA has not recognised that it has major problems, or has not planned significant action to address problems it has identified.</p> <p>The AVA is unaware of, or not in full control of, one or more of its major responsibilities.</p> <p>The AVA has repeatedly or persistently failed to take appropriate action in response to previous monitoring outcomes.</p>

## Glossary

This glossary is a quick-reference guide to key terms in this report that may be unfamiliar to some readers.

**academic standards** The standards set and maintained by AVAs for their courses and expected for their awards. See also **learning outcome**, **level descriptor** and **grade descriptor**.

**Access to HE course** Course leading to the award of the **Access to HE Diploma**.

**Access to HE Diploma** Access to Higher Education Diploma: a nationally recognised qualification that is credit-based and graded in accordance with the terms of the [Access to HE Diploma and credit specifications](#)<sup>5</sup> and the standard **grading** scheme. Each Access to HE Diploma has its own approved set of units of assessment, governed by **rules of combination**.

**Access Recognition and Licensing Committee** Committee appointed by the QAA Board to have responsibility for the **Recognition Scheme**, which monitors **AVAs** via their **annual self-evaluation** reports and through the process of **relicensing review**.

**Access Validating Agency** See **AVA**.

**achievement transcript** See **certification**.

**annual self-evaluation reports** Reports produced every year by an AVA using their own information to assess their performance.

**audit trail** A group or sequence of documents collectively demonstrating that a particular quality assurance process has taken place.

**AVA** Abbreviation of **Access Validating Agency**, an organisation licensed by QAA to undertake the development, validation, monitoring and review of individual **Access to HE Diploma** courses and, accordingly, to award the Diploma (or, where appropriate, **credit** towards the Diploma).

**award** A qualification, or the allocation of **credit** to a student.

**awarding organisation** An organisation recognised by Ofqual to award Ofqual-regulated qualifications.

**centre** See **provider**.

**certification** Provision, to students, of a formal certificate testifying that they have been awarded the Access to HE Diploma, together with details of what they have achieved (achievement transcript). See also **precept** and **licensing criteria**.

**course recognition** The formal approval of a specified Access to HE Diploma course which may be delivered by a particular provider/centre. For course recognition to be completed, the **AVA** confirms the course in QAA's Access courses database as a QAA-recognised Access to HE course. See also **precept** and **licensing criteria**.

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<sup>5</sup> [www.accesstohe.ac.uk/AboutUs/Publications/Pages/AHE-Diploma-and-credit-specifications-06.aspx](http://www.accesstohe.ac.uk/AboutUs/Publications/Pages/AHE-Diploma-and-credit-specifications-06.aspx)

**credit(s)** A means of quantifying and recognising learning expressed as numbers of credits at a specific **level**.

**criterion-referenced assessment** An assessment of a student's work against the achievement of **learning outcomes**.

**Diploma approval** The point when, having considered the recommendations of a validation panel, an AVA formally confirms that a Diploma has met all requirements (including requirements made in conditions) and that it may be offered by the provider(s)/centre(s) that have been approved to deliver it.

**enhancement** In the context of an **AVA**: taking deliberate steps to improve practice.

**external moderation** A process, conducted by suitably qualified people not employed at the provider in question, that is intended to assure an assessment outcome is fair and reliable; that correct procedures have been followed; and that assessment criteria have been applied consistently.

**feature of good practice** A positive aspect of the way an **AVA** meets the **licensing criteria**, which may be seen as exemplary to others.

**framework** A published formal structure.

**further education (FE)** Formal learning that follows compulsory education and may take the form of A levels, NVQs or an Access to HE course. Some form of further education is normally required to qualify for entry to higher education.

**governance** The framework of formal structures and practices through which an organisation is governed, including its board of directors and committees, as specified in its relevant charter, constitution, articles or other formal documentation. See also **precept** and **licensing criteria**.

**grade descriptors** Statements about what a learner is expected to know, understand and/or be able to demonstrate in order to achieve a particular grade for a unit of study.

**grading** Systematically ascertaining whether students have met the learning outcomes of a unit, and, if so, whether they have done so at level 3 (pass), or at a sufficient standard for a merit or distinction, following the process and regulations of the Access to HE grading scheme. See [Grading scheme handbook](#).<sup>6</sup>

**learning outcome** What a learner is expected to know, understand and/or be able to demonstrate after completing a process of learning, for example a particular unit of study.

**level** A way of classifying how advanced an educational course is. Further and higher education qualifications are at eight different levels. The Access to HE Diploma is a further education qualification at level 3.

**level descriptors** Statements about what a learner is expected to know, understand and/or be able to demonstrate at a particular educational **level**.

**licensing criteria** Formally stated requirements underpinning the five **precepts** that AVAs must meet in order to be licensed or relicensed by QAA (forming part of the **Recognition**

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<sup>6</sup> [www.accesstohe.ac.uk/AboutUs/Publications/Pages/Grading-scheme-index.aspx](http://www.accesstohe.ac.uk/AboutUs/Publications/Pages/Grading-scheme-index.aspx)

**Scheme).**

**management** The staffing, operations, and systems and procedures in place to implement an AVA's responsibilities. See **precept** and **licensing criteria**.

**moderation** A process intended to check that an assessment outcome is fair and reliable and that assessment criteria have been applied consistently. This may be done internally (within the organisation) or externally (see **external moderation**).

**monitoring** Checking processes on a periodic basis and recording the results in a way that can be accessed and interpreted to inform improvements. See also **precept** and **licensing criteria**.

**National Open College Network (NOCN)** A UK awarding organisation offering **credit-based** qualifications accredited by the relevant regulatory authorities in England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland and licensing the Open College Networks (OCNs).

**Ofqual** The regulator of general secondary and further education qualifications in England and of vocational qualifications at all **levels** in England and Northern Ireland. See also **awarding organisation**.

**OCN** Abbreviation for Open College Network, one of a number of regional organisations licensed by the **National Open College Network**.

**Open College Network** See **OCN**.

**precepts** A set of five requirements that an organisation must meet, under the QAA **Recognition Scheme**, in order to hold an **AVA** licence. The five precepts are: governance; strategic planning; management; course recognition; and moderation, monitoring and certification. Each is supported by clearly defined **licensing criteria**.

**programme (of study)** An approved course of study that provides a coherent learning experience and normally leads to a qualification.

**provider** or **centre** An organisation that delivers recognised courses leading to the Access to HE Diploma.

**provider/centre approval** The successful outcome of the process through which an AVA approves a provider or centre to deliver one or more Access to HE Diplomas.

**QAA** The Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education. QAA is responsible for the national recognition and regulation of **Access to HE courses**. QAA is also responsible for reviewing and reporting on standards and quality in UK higher education.

**recommended action** Something that QAA advises an **AVA** to do, in an annual monitoring report or **relicensing review** report.

**Recognition Scheme** The QAA Recognition Scheme for Access to Higher Education in England, Wales and Northern Ireland, which was established by **QAA** and details the structures and means by which QAA meets its responsibilities for the **Access to HE Diploma**.

**relicensing review** A process carried out by QAA to renew the right of an **AVA** to recognise courses leading to the Access to HE Diploma and award the qualification to students.

**required action** Something that an **AVA** must do in order to be licensed or relicensed by **QAA** to validate **Access to HE Diplomas**.

**revalidation** Renewal by an **AVA** of its existing or previous **validation** of a recognised Access to HE Diploma course.

**risk** The measure used by QAA in its judgements to indicate the extent to which an **AVA** meets the **licensing criteria** (classified as low, medium, high or very high).

**rules of combination** Rules defining the required achievement for individual Access to HE awards; these normally identify a particular set of approved named units that a student must complete to accumulate the required credits for the Diploma.

**self-evaluation** A document prepared by an **AVA**, and supplied to QAA, to demonstrate how the AVA judges that it is meeting the **licensing criteria**.

**standardisation** Specific measures taken by an AVA to ensure consistency in the standards and grading of student achievement in relation to the Access to HE Diploma.

**strategic planning** The systematic preparation whereby an organisation (in this context, an **AVA**), sets out to fulfil its role and the requirements placed upon it. See **precepts and licensing criteria**.

**transcript** A formal written statement of a student's achievement in an assessment and what grades or marks have been awarded.

**unit** A self-contained, structured course of study, with a coherent and explicit set of learning outcomes and assessment criteria.

**validation** The process of detailed scrutiny applied to a submission for a new Access to HE Diploma. It includes consideration of the individual units and the **rules of combination** that specify the required learning for the award of the Diploma. Provided the result is satisfactory, the process leads to a recommendation for formal approval of the Diploma by the **AVA**.

**validation panel** A team of experts appointed by an **AVA** to scrutinise proposals for new or existing **Access to HE Diplomas**.

**widening participation** Increasing the involvement in higher education of people from a wider range of backgrounds and circumstances.

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